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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BOGOTA 002619

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PHUM PTER CO

SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR MEETS WITH PEACE COMMUNITY ABOUT URABA MASSACRE

REF: A. BOGOTA 2348

1B. BOGOTA 2156
1C. BOGOTA 1999
1D. BOGOTA 1918

Classified By: Ambassador William B. Wood for reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

11. (C) On March 16, Ambassador met with representatives of the peace community of San Jose de Apartado, who reiterated their statements that the February 21-22 massacre of eight civilians in the area was the work of the Army's 17th Brigade. Ambassador expressed condolences to the community and reiterated our public call for a quick, complete, and transparent investigation of the massacre that identifies and punishes the perpetrators, whoever they are. He urged representatives of the peace community to cooperate with Government civilian investigators, who are in the best position to determine the truth of what happened. Two days earlier, Embassy officials met with this group, plus two additional members of the peace community, including the mother of Luis Eduardo Guerra. Peace community representatives told Emboffs the 17th Brigade had detained Guerra's mother and other family members for two days in her house and bragged to her that they had murdered her son and his family. The group reiterated that the peace community will not speak to Fiscalia investigators. End Summary.

Embassy Meeting with Peace Community

12. (C) On March 14, Political officers and Assistant Army Attache met with three members of the peace community of San Jose de Apartado, community founder Sister Clara Lagos, and two members of U.S. NGO Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) to discuss the February 21-22 massacre of eight individuals in the Uraba region of Antioquia Department (refs A-D). The three members of the peace community included the mother of Luis Eduardo Guerra, a peace community leader killed in the massacre, and two members of the community's governing body, or "Internal Council." There are reports that one of the Council members present, Wilson David, is a member of the FARC's 5th Front. The Roman Catholic Bishop of Apartado, Monsignor German Garcia, has told the press that Clara Lagos, whom he ordered out of the community two years ago, does not represent the Diocese of Apartado, or, in his opinion, the Church.

13. (C) During the meeting, David noted that despite Colombian military claims to the contrary, members of the Army's 17th Brigade had been in the hamlet of Las Nieves, a 3-4 hour walk from the peace community, two days before the February 21 massacre. He said the military was in the area searching for FARC 5th Front militia commander "Macho Rusio," which led to Rusio's death and injuries to his daughter and two soldiers. (Our understanding, however, is that the operation against Macho Rusio occurred two to three weeks before the Uraba massacre.)

14. (C) "Myriam," a middle-aged woman, who arrived with no identification documents, introduced as Luis Eduardo Guerra's mother, told Emboffs, in a brief statement, that on February 21 roughly 20 soldiers from the 17th Brigade's 33rd Counterguerrilla Battalion arrived at her home and detained her and ten other family members for two days. Per ref A, representatives of Peace Brigades International (PBI) earlier told Emboffs that the soldiers detained the group for a week, and only released them when a large group from the peace community arrived at the home on February 27. Myriam said the soldiers accused her and her family members of being guerrillas and bragged to her that they had murdered her son and his family. She said the soldiers excavated a grave-size hole inside her dirt floor home, on the pretext of searching for hidden weapons. When asked follow-up questions about the events she described, however, Myriam was not able to respond. She said she would not be able to identify any of the responsible soldiers, even in a confidential photo array at the Embassy. She did not know who was in command of the soldiers who confined her, could not remember any of their names, and was unable to describe details of their uniforms

or equipment. David then added that soldiers scrawled "33rd Counterguerrilla Battalion: Your Worst Nightmare" on a walls of the home, which they subsequently tried to erase. He said the community had taken photographs of the wall, but had not developed them yet.

15. (C) David described the scene when the peace community arrived at the mass grave site outside the home of the late Bolivar family on February 25. Arriving before the military and the staff from the Prosecutor General's Office ("Fiscalia"), they observed that the house had been ransacked and was stained with blood. David complained that when the military arrived, soldiers aggressively pointed their guns at community members until told to cease and desist by their commanding officer. He also reported that soldiers were taking video and photographs of peace community members.

More Allegations Against 17th Brigade

16. (C) Sister Clara and the two peace community leaders also told Emboffs that Wilmar Durango (alias "Pico de Loro"), an alleged paramilitary, is an active member of the 17th Brigade and has been seen working with the police in the area. David added that he has two signed threat letters from Wilmar who has made threats against other members of the community as well.

Community Wants GOC Protection

17. (C) Despite their demand that the security forces not enter the peace community, representatives told Emboffs the military is obliged to protect them, without "militarizing" their communities, consistent with special measures mandated by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. Members added that they had been in discussions with Vice-President Santos regarding the establishment of a police station, located outside the peace community on the way to Apartado. They noted that the community would also like the permanent presence of civilian authorities in the community, such as representatives of the Human Rights Ombudsman's Office ("Defensoria") and the Inspector General's Office ("Procuraduria").

Ambassador Meets with Representatives

18. (C) On March 16, Ambassador met with Lagos, Internal Council member Reynaldo David, and FOR representatives. Ambassador expressed the USG's condolences for the community's loss and reiterated our call for a quick, complete, and transparent investigation that identifies and punishes the perpetrators of this heinous crime. He urged the community to cooperate with Government investigators, since they, unlike the Embassy, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and other non-investigative organizations they were talking to, are in a position to gather evidence and reach a definitive conclusion about the facts in the case. He offered the Embassy's assistance in working with government investigators. The Ambassador said the community should work to overcome past problems with the Fiscalia and focus on doing all it can to find the truth and help resolve this crime as quickly and completely as possible.

19. (C) Peace community representatives repeated much of what they had shared with Embassy officials on March 14. However, Reynaldo David added new information about potential witnesses. He said, for example, an unnamed peasant had seen Army troops in the company of masked informants in the region immediately prior to the massacre. These masked informants allegedly said the Army should only kill with machetes in order to avoid alerting residents in the area. Reynaldo also said that the brother of Luis Eduardo Guerra had seen the military seize him and later listened from the woods as soldiers ransacked the Bolivar family's residence and massacred the family of five. Both of these witnesses are allegedly in hiding, and are unwilling to testify to anyone other than residents of the peace community or representatives of the community's accompanying NGOs. PBI representatives had told the Embassy about an alleged witness to the Bolivar family's murder, but the witness was described at that time as an unrelated worker whose whereabouts were unknown. Lagos insisted the military is obligated to protect the community, but the military has always treated the community as hostile. She added that no matter who actually committed the massacre, the Army was responsible for the deaths, whether by "action" or "omission."

Comment

110. (C) A quick, complete, transparent investigation is

needed to uncover the real truth. A successful effort, however, will need cooperation from the peace community and the eyewitnesses it has identified. Thus far, the peace community, perhaps out of fear, has refused to cooperate. We will continue to urge the Government to make the investigation of this case a top priority, as we simultaneously encourage the peace community to cooperate with the GOC. The peace community is holding an 8th anniversary celebration in San Jose de Apartado on March 23 and has invited the international community to attend.

WOOD